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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) listening needs of college students in Taiwan, examining the ESL conversational and academic listening abilities required by college students and differences in listening needs between effective and ineffective ESL listeners. Study participants were 296 Taiwanese college freshmen. The study questionnaire was based on the taxonomy of listening skills proposed by Richards (1983). It included 33 items on conversational listening abilities and 18 items on academic listening abilities. Results indicated that college students had more needs for conversational listening than for academic listening. The most important conversational listening need was the ability to detect key words, and the most important academic listening need was the ability to follow different modes of lecturing (spoken, audio, and audiovisual). The study also found that effective listeners had significantly more conversational listening needs than did ineffective listeners, and male listeners had more conversational listening needs than did female listeners. Implications for the design of ESL listening curricula are presented. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

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# Analysis of EFL Listening Needs by Taiwanese College Students

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The purpose of the present study is to investigate the EFL listening needs of college students in Taiwan. The major research questions are: (1) What are the EFL conversational and academic listening abilities required by college students? (2) Are there differences in listening needs between effective and ineffective EFL listeners? Subjects in the study were 296 college freshmen in Taiwan. The instrument used in the study was a questionnaire based on the taxonomy of listening skills proposed by Richards (1983). It includes 33 items on conversational listening abilities, and 18 items on academic listening abilities. Results indicate that college students had more needs for conversational listening than for academic listening. The most important conversational listening need is the 'ability to detect key words,' and the most important academic listening need is the 'ability to follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual.' Besides, the study found that effective listeners had significantly more conversational listening needs than ineffective listeners did, and male listeners also had more conversational listening needs than female listeners. Finally, based on the results, several implications were proposed for the design of EFL listening curriculum.

## INTRODUCTION

With the emphasis on communication competence in the field of SLA, scholars and teachers have recognized the importance of teaching listening comprehension in the second language classroom. Richards (1983) indicated that the procedures of assessing learner needs were essential before instructional activities could be selected or developed. Shieh & Wu (1988) also pointed that understanding the learner's needs or expectations was the first and crucial step in starting any curriculum reform. Furthermore, though much work on English for academic purposes (EAP) has been done in identifying literacy needs, little attention has been paid to describe the listening requirements (Ferris & Tagg, 1996a, 1996b). According to Richards (1983), the assessment of learner needs for listening comprehension refers to procedures aimed at identifying the type of listening skills the learner requires based on situations and purposes the listener will encounter.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the EFL listening needs of college students in Taiwan. The major research questions explored in the study are: (1) What are the EFL conversational and academic listening abilities required by college students? (2) Are there differences in listening needs between effective and ineffective EFL listeners? By providing empirical evidence, the present study can seek to contribute to our understanding of the EFL listening needs by college students in Taiwan. Thus, results of the current study can give instructors, students and publishers some useful suggestions on the instruction of EFL listening comprehension.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

From the review of research literature, several studies are found to be related to the needs analysis of EFL listening ability. Powers (1986) has investigated the academic demands related to listening skills. He conducted a survey to obtain faculty perceptions of the importance of various listening skills and to determine their views of alternative means of

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evaluating these skills. Results showed that the listening skills related to lecture content were perceived more important and that the evaluation tasks involving recall of details and inference or deduction were judged more important than others. It is also revealed that the test items stress vocabulary that is common in spoken English, and sound/intonation distinctions that non-native speakers were seen as having disproportionately greater difficulty than native speakers

Besides, a study on academic oral communication needs of EAP was conducted by Ferris & Tagg (1996a). By surveying over 900 professors at four institutions, they examined the instructors' expectation for the types of listening and speaking tasks, their requirements of college and university students, and the ways to enable students to complete these classroom tasks successfully. Results demonstrated that instructors' requirements of oral communication in class varied across academic discipline, type of institution, and class size. U. S. instructors' lecturing styles were becoming less formal and more interactive, and they think that effective lecture note-taking for students is very important in their courses. This trend placed new expectations upon the students. The research also pointed that tasks such as in-class debates, student-led discussion, and out-of-class assignments that need interaction with native speakers were to be fairly uncommon in any context.

In another study by Ferris & Tagg (1996b), they found even though the majority of ESL students are first-generation immigrants who have lived and gone to school in U. S. for many years they still felt uncomfortable with small-group discussions and graded group project. ESL students have difficulties with asking and responding question, general listening comprehension and class participation. Reasons for this hesitation is caused by linguistic competency and differences between home culture and U. S. educational culture. In their findings, ESL students should have opportunities and encouragement to interact with native speakers. Instructors can provide real lectures by a variety of speakers and cope with genre-specific vocabulary which will be helpful for ESL students.

In Taiwan, many students are not familiar with listening to spoken English. When they listen to native English speakers, they cannot comprehend what the speaker says. Yan (1988) investigated why Taiwanese students have impediment on listening and found out English learners need some listening skill and linguistic knowledge. She chose the students in National Taiwan Normal University as subjects. The result shows that they lack of ability to distinguish stress, intonation, and do not have rich phrases and genre-specific vocabularies. Also, linguistic knowledge of syntax, semantics and pragmatics is necessary for English listening needs. Taiwanese college students should strengthen the above ability to enhance their listening comprehension.

Yao (1995) used questionnaires to analyze students' needs for listening course and the factors which affect their listening comprehension. The subjects were from National Chung Hsing University. She found that the speaker's speed, accent, vocabulary, background knowledge and interest will affect college students' listening comprehension. Among them, the speakers' speed is the most important factor for students to comprehend. The teachers should notice the content of material and how it can arouse the students' interest. Most subjects also agree to increase the oral training course and avoid "Teachers talk much; students learn little". The interaction between teachers and students in the classroom should be enhanced.

Finally, Yang (1996) examined the views of Taiwanese college students and English instructors toward the curriculum of the freshman course 'English Listening'. He proposed guidelines for the curriculum design of 'English Listening', including: definite course objectives, proficiency-oriented instruction, two-way interactive teaching, interesting and multi-media material, and communicative activities. Through needs assessment, Yang (1996) found that students put more emphasis on the training of conversational listening

skills while faculty emphasized more on academic listening skills. He suggested that the two different listening needs could be arranged without conflicting each other, i.e., conversational listening for freshman course and academic listening for sophomore course.

## METHOD

### Subject

In the present study, subjects were 296 students from the freshmen at National Yunlin University of Science & Technology. Having learned English as a foreign language for about six years in school, subjects had approximately a low-intermediate level of EFL. Subjects' listening proficiency was based on their grades on the freshmen first semester course 'English for Language Laboratory'.

### Instrument

The instrument used in the study was a questionnaire based on the taxonomy of listening skills proposed by Richards (1983). It consisted of two parts, 51 Likert-scaled items altogether. The first part includes 33 items related to conversational listening abilities, and the second part includes 18 items related to academic listening abilities. The questionnaire asked subjects to choose an appropriate scale of importance for each listening ability according to the needs they had for EFL listening comprehension.

### Data Analysis

For the scoring of questionnaire, the scale range for each item is 1-5, i.e. from 5 (very important) to 1 (very unimportant). Frequency counting and t-test were adopted to analyze subjects' scores on questionnaires. The statistical analyses were conducted by using SPSS 7.0 for Windows.

## RESULTS

### Analysis of Subjects' EFL Listening Needs

Based on the frequency counting of each item, the results of the listening need questionnaire completed by subjects are described below. First, Table 1 shows the statistics for the two types of listening needs. Results of t-test indicate that subjects had significantly more needs for conversational listening than for academic listening.

Table 1. T-Test on Listening Need Type

| Need Type | N | Mean | SD | t | df | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conversational Listening | 296 | 3.58 | 0.73 | 2.07* | 295 | 0.039 |
| Academic Listening | 296 | 3.53 | 0.91 | | | |

* $p<0.05$

Table 2 lists the ten most important conversational listening needs. Among the 33 listening needs for English conversation, 'ability to detect key words' has the highest average frequency. Next is 'ability to guess the meanings of words from the contexts in which they occur', followed by 'ability to recognize vocabulary used in core conversational topics'.

Furthermore, Table 3 lists the five most important academic listening needs. Among

the 18 listening needs for English lecture, 'ability to follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual' is the most important academic listening need, and next is 'ability to recognize instructional/learner tasks'.

Table 2. Ten Most Important Conversational Listening Needs

| Conversational Listening Need | Rank | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ability to detect key words | 1 | 296 | 3.88 | 1.00 |
| Ability to guess the meanings of words from the contexts in which they occur | 2 | 296 | 3.86 | 0.96 |
| Ability to recognize vocabulary used in core conversational topics | 3 | 296 | 3.82 | 0.95 |
| Ability to make use of facial, paralinguistic, and other clues to work out meanings | 4 | 296 | 3.76 | 0.96 |
| Ability to recognize the communicative functions of utterances, according to situations, participants, goals | 5 | 296 | 3.74 | 0.97 |
| Ability to process speech containing pauses, errors, corrections | 6 | 296 | 3.67 | 1.19 |
| Ability to recognize cohesive devices in spoken discourse | 7 | 296 | 3.66 | 1.03 |
| Ability to adjust listening strategies to different kinds of listener purposes or goals | 8 | 296 | 3.65 | 1.04 |
| Ability to use real world knowledge and experience to work out purposes, goals, settings, procedures | 9 | 296 | 3.64 | 0.95 |
| Ability to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods | 10 | 296 | 3.63 | 1.00 |
| Ability to distinguish word boundaries | 10 | 296 | 3.63 | 0.97 |
| Ability to infer links and connections between events | 10 | 296 | 3.63 | 0.98 |
| Ability to process speech at different rates | 10 | 296 | 3.63 | 1.23 |

Table 3. Five Most Important Academic Listening Needs

| Academic Listening Need | Rank | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ability to follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual | 1 | 296 | 3.7 | 1.12 |
| Ability to recognize instructional/learner tasks | 2 | 296 | 3.65 | 1.04 |
| Ability to detect attitude of speaker toward subject matter | 3 | 296 | 3.62 | 1.07 |
| Ability to identify purpose and scope of lecture | 4 | 296 | 3.61 | 1.09 |
| Ability to recognize function of intonation to signal information structure | 5 | 296 | 3.59 | 1.02 |

**Difference in EFL Listening Needs between Effective and Ineffective Listeners**

With regard to the two types of listening needs, Table 4 demonstrates that effective listeners had more EFL listening needs, including both conversational listening and academic listening, than ineffective listeners. However, results of t-test show that the differences did not reach a significant level.

Table 4. T-Test on Listening Need Type for Effective and Ineffective Listeners

| Need Type | Effective | | | Ineffective | | | t | df | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | Mean | SD | N | Mean | SD | | | |
| Conversational Listening | 94 | 3.68 | 0.63 | 87 | 3.48 | 0.89 | 1.92 | 179 | 0.093 |
| Academic Listening | 94 | 3.53 | 0.82 | 87 | 3.51 | 1.04 | 0.20 | 179 | 0.841 |
| EFL Listening | 94 | 3.61 | 0.70 | 87 | 3.49 | 0.95 | 0.89 | 179 | 0.373 |

Results of t-test reveal that effective listeners had significantly more needs in the following conversational listening abilities, including: ability to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods, ability to recognize the stress patterns of words, ability to recognize the functions of stress and intonation to signal the information structure of utterances, ability to identify words in stressed and unstressed positions, ability to distinguish word boundaries, and ability to distinguish typical word order patterns in the target language. On the other hand, results of t-test found no significance difference in all of the 18 academic listening needs.

Table 5. Ten Most Important EFL Listening Needs for Effective Listeners

| Listening Need | Rank | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ability to guess the meanings of words from the contexts in which they occur | 1 | 94 | 3.96 | 0.91 |
| Ability to detect key words | 2 | 94 | 3.95 | 0.91 |
| Ability to recognize vocabulary used in core conversational topics | 3 | 94 | 3.88 | 0.87 |
| Ability to distinguish word boundaries | 4 | 94 | 3.87 | 0.91 |
| Ability to recognize the communicative functions of utterances, according to situations, participants, goals | 5 | 94 | 3.82 | 0.84 |
| Ability to make use of facial, paralinguistic, and other clues to work out meanings | 5 | 94 | 3.82 | 0.89 |
| Ability to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods | 7 | 94 | 3.79 | 0.85 |
| Ability to process speech containing pauses, errors, corrections | 7 | 94 | 3.79 | 1.04 |
| Ability to recognize cohesive devices in spoken discourse | 9 | 94 | 3.74 | 0.96 |
| Ability to distinguish typical word order patterns in the target language | 10 | 94 | 3.73 | 0.87 |

Besides, Table 5 lists the 10 most important conversational listening needs for effective listeners. On the other hand, results indicate that 'ability to guess the meanings of words from the contexts in which they occur' has the highest average importance, and next is 'ability to detect key words', followed by 'ability to recognize vocabulary used in core conversational topics.'

As for the EFL listening needs of ineffective listeners, Table 6 lists the ten most important EFL listening needs. Results demonstrate that 'ability to detect key words' has the highest average importance, and next is 'ability to recognize vocabulary used in core conversational topics', followed by 'ability to guess the meanings of words from the contexts in which they occur.'

Table 6.
Ten Most Important Conversational Listening Needs for Ineffective Listeners

| Conversational Listening Need | Rank | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ability to detect key words | 1 | 87 | 3.82 | 1.17 |
| Ability to recognize vocabulary used in core conversational topics | 2 | 87 | 3.77 | 1.08 |
| Ability to guess the meanings of words from the contexts in which they occur | 3 | 87 | 3.71 | 1.07 |
| Ability to make use of facial, paralinguistic, and other clues to work out meanings | 4 | 87 | 3.69 | 1.08 |
| Ability to process speech at different rates | 5 | 87 | 3.67 | 1.3 |
| Ability to recognize the communicative functions of utterances, according to situations, participants, goals | 6 | 87 | 3.64 | 1.12 |
| Ability to infer links and connections between events | 6 | 87 | 3.64 | 1.14 |
| Ability to adjust listening strategies to different kinds of listener purposes or goals | 8 | 87 | 3.63 | 1.21 |
| Ability to process speech containing pauses, errors, corrections | 9 | 87 | 3.61 | 1.31 |
| Ability to recognize elliptical forms of grammatical units and sentences | 10 | 87 | 3.56 | 1.06 |

## DISCUSSION

Results of the present study indicate that subjects had significantly more needs for conversational listening than for academic listening. This finding is consistent with Yang's (1996). Through needs assessment, Yang (1996) found that students put more emphasis on the training of conversational listening skills while faculty emphasized more on academic listening skills. He suggested that the two different listening needs could be arranged without conflicting each other, i.e., conversational listening for freshman course and academic listening for sophomore course.

Moreover, according to the study, among the 33 listening needs for English conversation, the 'ability to detect key words' has the highest average frequency. Next is the 'ability to

guess the meanings of words from the contexts in which they occur', followed by the 'ability to recognize vocabulary used in core conversational topics'. The results support Huckin, Haynes, & Coady's (1993) finding that the lexicon is a medium through which meanings are carried and negotiated. Most subjects realized that paying attention to each word or sentence when a person speaks is difficult and ineffective. Therefore, they thought they can get the meanings that was said through detecting key words and guessing the meanings of words from the context as a way to deal with unfamiliar vocabulary. Besides, results reveal that most subjects regarded vocabulary acquisition as the critical strategy for listening comprehension.

In addition, the most important listening need for subjects to listen to English lectures is the 'ability to follow different modes of lecturing (spoken, audio, audio-visual)' and the 'ability to recognize instructional/learner tasks.' This finding shows that both two abilities are related to listeners' background knowledge. Listeners should increase their world knowledge in order to follow different modes of lecturing. This finding is closely related to Paulston & Bruder's (1976 ) finding that listening materials for students to cope with an English speaking environment should consist of samples of natural language from as many different sources as possible, so the students will have experiences with many varieties of topics, situations, and speakers.

In the current study, the fourth important listening ability for English lecture is the ability to recognize function of intonation to signal information. This finding seems to prove that Clark (1996) pointed out that in spoken language, people have to deliver an utterance with intonation or prosody. We can know that subjects understand that it is difficult to follow each word which speakers are saying and realize the importance of working out important message by intonation and stress which are pronounced.

## CONCLUSION

With the emphasis on communication competence in the field of SLA, researchers and teachers have recognized the importance of teaching listening comprehension in L2 classroom. As a matter of fact, the planning of a successful language curriculum should first take learners needs into consideration. The present study is designed to investigate the EFL listening needs of college students in Taiwan. The results indicate that Taiwanese college students had more needs for conversational listening than for academic listening. The most important conversational listening need is the 'ability to detect key words,' and the most important academic listening need is the 'ability to follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual.'

Finally, based on the results of the study, several implications were proposed in terms of the design of EFL listening curriculum. EFL teachers will know the listening needs of their students. They can design the syllabus of listening courses more suitably for students, and arrange the listening program and teaching plan to focus on students' needs. Thus, students will have more interest in the listening course. As for the students, they can have a clear idea of their needs for learning EFL listening comprehension. Such understanding will be quite useful when they want to practice EFL listening and improve their listening ability. It is always important for publishers to know the real needs of the textbook users. According to the results of the study, they can publish new listening textbooks or modify current textbooks in order to meet the students' needs.

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